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The Battle of Wyoming And Hartley's Expedition

PROBABLY no episode of the Revolutionary War caused more horror and outrage among Americans than the so-called "Wyoming Massacre" on July 3, 1778.

The Wyoming Valley, a twenty-five-mile stretch along the Susquehanna River's North Branch, was claimed by both Pennsylvania and Connecticut, but since late 1775 the Connecticut faction had been in control, with men from the valley serving in Connecticut Continental regiments and holding office in the Assembly at Hartford. It was also a large grain-producing area. This, with the good communications the river provided to more populous areas downstream, made the valley, despite being on the frontier, an important source of provisions for the American army.

But the same river led upstream into territory dominated by the Iroquois, operating under the New York Tory, Major John Butler, as allies of the British. And from Butler's viewpoint, Wyoming was an attractive target: its productivity made its destruction worthwhile; with Connecticut too remote to protect it and Pennsylvania unwilling to help a settlement which rejected Pennsylvania jurisdiction, it was vulnerable; and the river made it accessible. There was the added advantage that considerable numbers of

the inhabitants were Tories. Butler had detailed information from Tories who had fled, and he could count on aid from those who had not.

As early as February, 1778, therefore, Butler began sending small raiding parties to collect up-to-date information and put the settlers on edge. The growing danger brought many of the inhabitants into one or another of the valley's forts.

Chief among these, south to north, were Wilkes-Barre Fort, a substantial installation on the left bank of the river; Forty Fort, another strong defense, across the river and about three miles farther north; Wintermoot's Fort (actually, only a stockade around the house of the Wintermoot family, who were suspected of being Tories), three or four miles upstream from Forty Fort; Jenkins' Fort, another stockaded house some three miles above Wintermoot's; and Pittston Fort, consisting of three blockhouses, located directly across the river from Jenkins' Fort. To hold these defenses, the men of the valley had been organized into the 24th Connecticut Militia Regiment, under Col. Nathan Denison. Also on hand were one Continental company and elements of two others, and Col. Zebulon Butler (no relation of John Butler), a local leader on

leave from his own regiment, the 3d Connecticut Continentals.

On June 27, Major Butler started from Tioga down the North Branch with about six hundred Indians and one hundred Tory Rangers. This approach was undetected until late on June 30, when thirteen men and boys, working in cornfields about five miles upstream from Jenkins' Fort, were suddenly attacked. Eight were killed or captured but the others escaped and spread the alarm.

By next morning, some four hundred militia under the joint command of Denison and Zebulon Butler marched from Forty Fort to the cornfield where the attack had occurred. They surprised and killed two Indians there, but met no other enemy.

Meanwhile, Major Butler had secretly made contact with local Tories, who guided his force to a wooded campsite less than a mile from Wintermoot's Fort. Later that day, he sent an officer to the fort to demand its surrender. Most of the people inside, promised that their lives would be spared, favored capitulation, so the militia lieutenant in command gave in.

On the following morning (July 2), Butler sent an officer to demand the surrender of Jenkins' Fort. As it was defended by only eight men, its commander also capitulated. Throughout the rest of the day, Ranger and Indian parties roamed the upper part of the valley, while Denison sent

out scouts from Forty Fort in an unsuccessful effort to determine the size and location of the enemy force. Neither side learned much of its opponent.

Even so, on the morning of July 3, Major Butler sent a message to Denison, demanding that all forts, all Continental troops, and all public stores in the valley be surrendered, with the militiamen being placed on parole not to fight for the rest of the war. In return, he guaranteed the safety of all inhabitants. Denison stalled for time, saying that he first had to consult with Zebulon Butler, and sent orders for his militiamen to reassemble. By noon, some 375 men had gathered, although the garrison at Pittston Fort had been unable to cross the river (the enemy had taken all the boats) and some men from the southern end of the valley had not arrived.

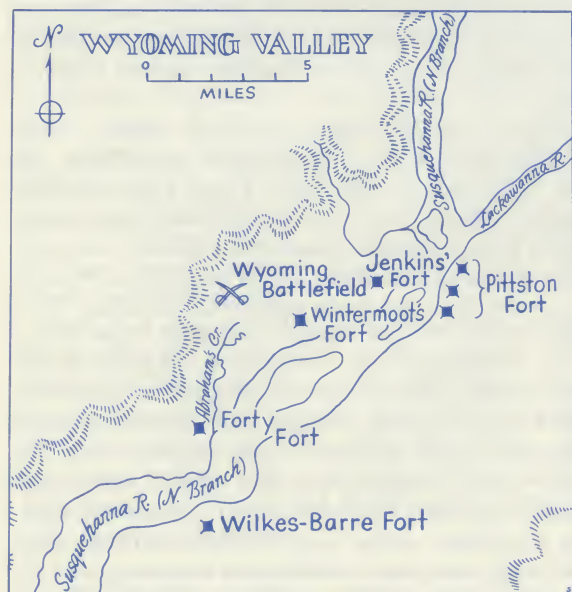
Denison and Zebulon Butler wanted to wait for reinforcements known to be on the way, but the others insisted on attack. They could see columns of smoke where abandoned houses to the north were burning, and they argued that the whole valley could be devastated while they waited. Colonel Denison gave in to the demands, and soon almost the whole garrison started out.

Still considering it rash to attack, Denison and Zebulon Butler halted on good defensive ground at Abraham's Creek, a mile or so northeast. Another argument occurred, with the two colonels' prudence being castigated as cowardice. Stung, they agreed to proceed, advancing toward Wintermoot's Fort.

There, the force deployed in a line that stretched northwest from high ground above the river, on the right, for three hundred or four hundred yards. No troops were held out as a reserve. Denison was in charge on the left, Zebulon Butler on the right.

Major John Butler had already made his dispositions. Setting both Jenkins' and Wintermoot's forts afire, he put his Rangers behind a log fence extending in a westerly direction from a point above Wintermoot's Fort. The Indians concealed themselves in a swamp beyond the western end of the fence.

Advancing toward the log fence, the Americans halted to fire three volleys, moving forward after each, meeting little resistance. When they halted for a fourth volley, however, the Tories behind the fence opened fire. The Indians in the swamp soon followed suit and the action became general. After half an hour, when the Indians





Zebulon Butler

were about to work around the American left flank, Denison shouted orders for the companies at that end of the line to fall back and form at right angles to the rest of the force. Either because they heard only the words "fall back" or because such a maneuver was too complex for untrained militia in the midst of battle, many men were plunged into confusion, crowding in on the other troops. The whole force quickly broke, and the men began to run away.

The Indians pursued relentlessly. Men were killed as they ran or when they halted and tried to surrender. According to Major Butler's report, the Indians took 227 scalps, but Colonel Denison reported 301 killed. Major Butler admitted having only three killed and eight wounded; accounts by other Tories and Indians place their losses somewhat higher, although nowhere near the eighty the Americans claimed.

Early on July 4, Major Butler met Colonel Denison, demanding surrender on the original terms. To give Zebulon Butler and the other Continentals time to leave so that they would not be carried off as prisoners, Denison delayed replying until afternoon. Even though he then told Major Butler that all the Continentals were gone, the Tory granted the same terms, also agreeing to use his "utmost influence" to protect private property. Butler further advised Denison to destroy Forty Fort's seven-barrel whiskey stock before the Indians arrived.

The formal surrender took place late that afternoon. Almost at once the Indians began looting. Major Butler answered Denison's protests by saying that he could not control the Indians, but he did ask Denison to supply a list of items taken so that compensation could be made.

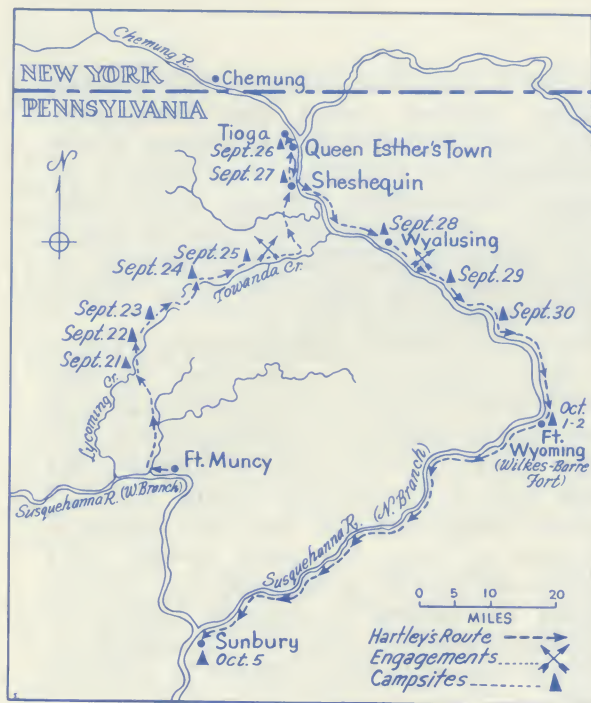
Depredations continued through the next three days, with the Indians threatening the lives of inhabitants as well as robbing them. Many set-

tlers left in haste, some going downriver, others striking overland toward East Stroudsburg. These, especially, suffered great hardship as they fled through the wilderness, some dying of exhaustion or starvation. Although Major Butler started his main force back to Tioga on July 8, some Indians stayed behind, terrorizing the remaining inhabitants. Faced with further threats, the last settlers left on July 18.

The attack had devastated the area and forced its virtual depopulation. In the battle, the militia had been crushed and no quarter had been given, but no massacre of the population took place afterwards. Great loss of property and much suffering had occurred. Clearly, however, refugees exaggerated the facts, thus adding to the wave of horror that swept through other parts of the frontier. In response, Col. Thomas Hartley was ordered to move his Continental regiment to Sunbury, and over a thousand Pennsylvania militiamen were ordered to reinforce him.

By August 1, Hartley was at Sunbury, but only a fraction of the promised militia actually joined him there. On August 4, Col. Zebulon Butler and 112 troops were back at Wilkes-Barre Fort, now being called Fort Wyoming. In succeeding weeks, settlers began returning, and Butler's force grew slightly, but small-scale Indian raids within short distances of the fort continued. Hartley, with barely two hundred men, was charged with protecting a frontier stretching from Wyoming to the Allegheny. This was an impossible defensive task, and he soon decided that he must take the offensive, creating a diversion which would lead





the Indians to stop raiding in order to guard their own villages.

Accordingly, on September 21, he started from Fort Muncy, on the West Branch of the Susquehanna, following the Sheshequin Path—a route that was so difficult that troops had to cut a new trail as they went. Autumn rains turned the streams into raging torrents. Colonel Hartley reported, however, that his men overcame all obstacles “with great Resolution and Fortitude.”

They struck north along Lycoming Creek to its source, then turned northeast to follow Towanda Creek. From that point, they were in hostile territory. However, they met no resistance until September 26, when the nineteen-man advance guard stumbled onto about an equal number of Indians. Both groups were surprised, but the Americans fired first. One Indian was killed and the rest fled.

With the column's presence discovered, Hartley hurried his men along. At Sheshequin, they found and freed fifteen captives the Indians had taken in raids, then pushed on to Tioga, arriving “much fatigued” after dark. Here they captured an Indian who said there were almost eight hundred Tories and Indians at Chemung, only twelve miles away.

The force was too weak to attack Chemung, so it paused next day only long enough to burn Tioga and the nearby Indian village called Queen Esther's Town before starting down the North Branch. After camping overnight at Sheshequin, it crossed to the left bank of the river on September 28 and marched to Wyalusing.

By now, rations were exhausted, so the morning of September 29 was devoted to slaughtering captured cattle and cooking the meat. When the column left at noon, about seventy men boarded captured canoes while the rest proceeded on foot.

Almost immediately, the advance guard came under attack, but soon brushed the enemy aside. Another attack occurred thirty minutes later, and this also was beaten off. Then, at about 2 P.M., a major assault was launched against the rear guard. Undetected, Hartley led part of the main body inland to some high ground, from which he could encircle the Indians. Then the men in the canoes landed and struck from the opposite direction. The enemy, almost completely surrounded and taken by surprise, soon broke and fled, leaving ten dead from a force Hartley estimated at almost two hundred. The Americans lost four killed and ten wounded.

The rest of the move to Wyoming, which was reached on October 1, was uneventful, although the troops knew that Indians were following closely (indeed, on October 3, three men who had ventured a short distance from Fort Wyoming were killed and scalped). Hartley left some of his men to reinforce Zebulon Butler and returned to Sunbury, arriving on October 5, having covered almost three hundred miles in two weeks, moving over difficult terrain and much of the time deep in enemy territory.

The Indian threat had not been eliminated—Hartley warned the Pennsylvania authorities that unless reinforcements were sent quickly, “You may have your Frontier much lower down than you expect”—but some reprisal had been exacted for the Wyoming raid, and the Indians had been shown that they too were vulnerable. It would take the Sullivan Expedition the following summer, carried out on a much larger scale, to bring the war home to the Iroquois, but an effective if small beginning had been made.